Philosophical literary shorts: I. nasty, brutish, and short

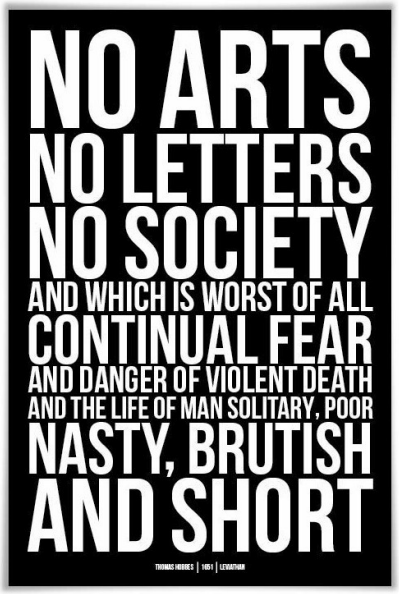
Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium. Religion, with its nailed down One God, who says Thou shalt, Thou shan't, and hammers home every time; philosophy, with its fixed ideas; science, with its "laws": they all of them, all of the time, want to nail us on to some tree or other.

But the novel, no. The novel is the highest complex of subtle interrelatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.

– D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy* (p. 172)

If it's all that nasty and brutish, why complain it's short?

– Bianco Luno



Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, i. xiii. 9

We will step outside our usual purview within formal philosophy and look at philosophical provocation expressed, illustrated, or gestured at in literature more widely. This will be an experimental venture into insights contributed by literary artists that push the limits of what rationally-minded, agenda-driven philosophers typically allow themselves to talk about.[1] For myself, I have always thought of philosophy as foremost an oral or literary art wanting to pin structure on human experience. Whether the structure is really there is always a question. As such, philosophy is provisional fiction compelled to take itself literally. The compulsion is real and not to be denied, but can also be stifling to the imagination. Genuinely creative writers are not so inhibited. Or, if they are, and are not aware of it, this is an aesthetic failing. Their work becomes intellectual propaganda. The greatest philosophers struggle against this compulsion as well, but the greatest artists are less prone to the malady in the first place. Proper philosophers want to wear their colors on their sleeve. A novelist, a short story writer, a poet, a dramatist, a filmmaker… who strains too hard to be pat and philosophical should be viewed with suspicion. They are in danger of acquiring the philosopher's arthritic imagination. *Imagination*, not information, is the source of every idea humans have ever had, something sometimes philosophers forget. To paraphrase a neuroscientist, "It ain't nothing until your brain has decided to load it with a label."[2]

Unless this last statement is *it* – there will be no simple theme or theory to be proffered or defended for this occasion. To get things started, for this, perhaps, first in a series of sessions, I am selecting a short

1. On another occasion, we will explore incursions on truth from the other side – from *philosophers* who, at least sometimes, are compelled to adopt distinctly *literary* forms of expression: aphorism, maxim, fragment, fable, letter, journal, etc. – *literary philosophical* shorts. Thinkers like Heraclitus, Diogenes of Sinope, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Alain, Weil, Wittgenstein, E. M. Cioran, *et al.* – *and why.* In what way is the essay or the treatise inadequate?
2. Lisa Feldman Barrett.

list of short pieces or passages that I, for one, have been affected by because of their succinct philosophical resonance. The resonance may be very specific to me. The items on my list may do nothing for you. But for future similar sessions, I invite attendees to suggest submissions of short texts that resonate for them to share and discuss with the rest of us. They might be epiphanic for others besides you, but we have to risk they may not.[3] I ask that your selections be supplied or freely accessible on the Internet, and short enough that no one in attendance has an excuse not to read them. You should be prepared to say something briefly about what caused you to select them. We will present and discuss as many as time allows for a session. This project may span several sessions, depending on response and interest.

No one is required to participate in the discussion, auditors are welcome. But, if you do choose to participate in the discussion, please have read the shorts before, and thought about them. As presenter, you may read your selections aloud to the group to make sure we have all been exposed to them in real time if not beforehand.

The topic, atypical for this club, is more about surveying bite-sized remarks by thinkers and writers on their/our condition. It's about being exposed to ideas that may, or may not, spark further thought for you. And whichever of these happens that should teach you something about you and others. Literary artists, both those who see themselves as such and those who are in spite of themselves, can have a knack for doing this in fewer words than verbose philosophers. As far from reality as they are, philosophers are not as often excused for being so. They are expected to say something, not merely stand mute or gesticulate. They are expected to fake some clarity if they can't actually make it.[4]

The idea is that it should pack a lot of meaning into a few words. Ideals, I imagine, are like one-liners such this from Samuel Beckett: "I know that my eyes are open because of the tears that pour continuously from them" or from La Rochefoucauld: "We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others, that in the end, we become disguised to ourselves." Or Ambrose Bierce: "Egotist, *n.* Someone who thinks more of himself than of me." Or even Saint Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words."[5] But I can also imagine two and a half pages as in the short story "God's Bones" by Yasunari Kawabata. Or a few lines or paragraphs from Clarice Lispector…

In what sense "philosophical"? For this occasion, "being philosophical" means to provoke thought outside the norm or naive consolation, to shy away from knee-jerk reactions, both intellectual and emotional, long enough to experience the obvious anew. The target is a snapshot of philosophy in the wild, before it is – if ever – domesticated.

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3. If they resonate *only* for you and not others, this is a perfect occasion to ask and discuss *why*. It is an invitation to explore the *varieties* of human nature. To the extent philosophy is *not* mere confession, it must concern itself with the variety.
4. The fossilized writing forms of, especially academic, philosophy can, and too often do, without this fact being appreciated, distort its message – announce a conclusion, hint at its argument (premises) or elaboration (descriptions), and conclude with a restatement – create the impression of closure, truth, or reality. The claim here is not that this formality is not useful. But that we forget *why* it is useful. It supplies comfort and predictability. It conduces to *consensus* formation. It attempts to pin experience down. ("Nail" it as Lawrence said.) Nor is the claim here that something like this is avoidable, given our limitations. The closest to a claim I make here is that we must always suspect that what *we don't want to hear* is truer – *enhances our capacity for discrimination* – than what "floats our boat." *Fear* in epistemology is our friend.
5. Translation: "Shut up about God, *do* something!" It's not clear that St. Frances ever said this in so many, or few, words, but someone, inspired by his vision, did.

A short list of shorts

Some are quoted in full; others are linked. Some are famous; others (I think) ought to be. The listing is in no particular order. You are welcome to submit your own suggestions via a Meetup message to me for a future presentation and discussion.

1. Clarice Lispector

- "Mineirinho" (aperçu) [how shaky our convictions about justice]
- "...the psychotic says that two plus two equals five. The neurotic says: two plus two equals four but I just can't take it." (as quoted by her biographer, B. Moser)
- "For I can now see that there is a price to be paid for everything, and that life is so costly it can even bring about death." (p.103, *Selected Cronicas*)

2. Cesare Pavese Compare with Clarice Lispector's similar remark this comment from *The Burning Brand*: "Every luxury must be paid for, and everything is a luxury, starting with being in this world."

3. Yasunari Kawabata "God's Bones," [a very short story about vanity]

4. George Bernanos "God exists after all…" a passage from the novel *A Diary of Country Priest.* [As good a reason as any for believing in God: who would protect the universe from us?]

5. Stevie Smith

Not waving but drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.[6]

6. Samuel Taylor Coleridge

6. Commentary.

“And die so slowly, that none call it murder!” Nobody dies unjustly. But *speed* matters.
– from Religious Musings : A Desultory Poem Written On The Christmas Eve Of 1794).

7. Fernando Pessoa

- “(To think is to have eyes that are ill.)”

- “All the nothing you are is yours.”

- “I have no sincerity at all to give you.
  If I speak to you, I instinctively adapt my phrases
  To a meaning I forget to have.”
  – Pessoa as Álvaro de Campos, *Shorter Poems and Fragments*

8. Virginia Woolf

“To feed eight children on philosophy!”

– from the novel, *To the Lighthouse*

9. Flannery O’Connor

- “The world was made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are...There’s a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive…” (from the novel *The Violent Bear it Away)*

- “In *my* church, the Church of Christ without Christ, the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk, and what’s dead stays that way.” (from the novel *Wise Blood*)

10. Emily Dickinson

- (260)
  I’m Nobody! Who are you?
  Are you – Nobody – too?
  Then there’s a pair of us!
  Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

  How dreary – to be – Somebody!
  How public – like a Frog –
  To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
  To an admiring Bog!

- “I was thinking, today—as I noticed, that the ‘Supernatural,’ was only the Natural, disclosed” (to Thomas Wentworth Higginson February 1863)

11. Gustave Flaubert

- A famous passage from *Madame Bovary*, as translated by Lydia Davis: "…since none of us can ever express the exact measure of our needs, or our ideas, or our sorrows, and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when we long to move the stars to pity."
  – *Madame Bovary* (1857) pt. 1, ch. 12.

- "To be stupid, and selfish, and to have good health are the three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, the others are useless."
  – letter to Louise Colet, 13 August 1846

- "Books are made not like children but like pyramids…and they're just as useless! and they stay in the desert!… Jackals piss at their foot and the bourgeois climb up on them."
  – letter to Ernest Feydeau, November/December 1857

[Thanks to Olivia Dresher for the next two selections.]

12. William Broyles

Well-known screen writer and decorated Vietnam War veteran. From a 1984 article in *Esquire* entitled, "Why Men Love War":

> …Like all lust, for as long as it lasts it dominates everything else; a nation's other problems are seared away, a phenomenon exploited by kings, dictators, and presidents since civilization began.
>
> And I don't mean war as an addiction, the constant rush that war junkies get, the crazies mailing ears home to their girlfriends, the zoomies who couldn't get an erection unless they were cutting in the afterburners on their F-4s. And, finally, I'm not talking about how some men my age feel today, men who didn't go to war but now have a sort of nostalgic longing for something they missed, some classic male experience, the way some women who didn't have children worry they missed something basic about being a woman, something they didn't value when they could have done it.
>
> …For all these reasons, men love war. But these are the easy reasons, the first circle, the ones we can talk about without risk of disapproval, without plunging too far into the truth or ourselves. But there are other, more troubling reasons why men love war. The love of war stems from the union, deep in the core of our being between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death. War may be the only way in which most men touch the mythic domains in our soul. It is, for men, at some terrible level, the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and looking at what's underneath. To see war is to see into the dark heart of things, that no-man's-land between life and death, or even beyond.

13. Philip Larkin

This Be The Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

– from *Collected Poems*.

14. Juan Ramón Jiménez

"Platero, if someday I toss myself into the well, it won't be to kill myself, believe me, but to grasp the stars more swiftly."

– from *Platero and I*.

15. Jean-Luc Godard

"Can one be guilty of being innocent?"

– from *France/Tour/Detour/Deux/Enfants* (documentary film, 1978). [On interviewing children.]

16. Guaman Poma

"To write is to weep."

– *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1616). [On ending a letter to the Spanish Royal Crown, after detailing the atrocities performed on the indigenous people of Peru.]

17. Anne Carson

Kafka's "The Top" is a story about a philosopher who spends his spare time around children so he can grab their tops in spin. To catch a top still spinning makes him happy for a moment in his

belief “that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.” Disgust follows delight almost at once and he throws down the top, walks away. Yet hope of understanding continues to fill him each time top-spinning preparations begin among the children: “as soon as the top began to spin and he was running breathlessly after it, the hope would turn to certainty but when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand he felt nauseated.”

The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. What is the relation of impertinence to the hope of understanding? To delight?

The story concerns the reason why we love to fall in love. Beauty spins and the mind moves. To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight need not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.

Suppression of impertinence is not the lover's aim. Nor can I believe this philosopher really runs after understanding. Rather, he has become a philosopher (that is, one whose profession is to delight in understanding) in order to furnish himself with pretexts for running after tops.

– Preface, *Eros the Bittersweet - an Essay* (1986)

18. Franz Kafka

The Problem of Our Laws

OUR LAWS are not generally known; they are kept secret by the small group of nobles who rule us. We are convinced that these ancient laws are scrupulously administered; nevertheless it is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know. I am not thinking of possible discrepancies that may arise in the interpretation of the laws, or of the disadvantages involved when only a few and not the whole people are allowed to have a say in their interpretation. These disadvantages are perhaps of no great importance. For the laws are very ancient; their interpretation has been the work of centuries, and has itself doubtless acquired the status of law; and though there is still a possible freedom of interpretation left, it has now become very restricted. Moreover the nobles have obviously no cause to be influenced in their interpretation by personal interests inimical to us, for the laws were made to the advantage of the nobles from the very beginning, they themselves stand above the laws, and that seems to be why the laws were entrusted exclusively into their hands. Of course, there is wisdom in that – who doubts the wisdom of the ancient laws? – but also hardship for us; probably that is unavoidable.

The very existence of these laws, however, is at most a matter of presumption. There is a tradition that they exist and that they are a mystery confided to the nobility, but it is not and cannot be more than a mere tradition sanctioned by age, for the essence of a secret code is that it should remain a mystery. Some of us among the people have attentively scrutinized the doings

of the nobility since the earliest times and possess records made by our forefathers – records which we have conscientiously continued – and claim to recognize amid the countless number of facts certain main tendencies which permit of this or that historical formulation; but when in accordance with these scrupulously tested and logically ordered conclusions we seek to adjust ourselves somewhat for the present or the future, everything becomes uncertain, and our work seems only an intellectual game, for perhaps these laws that we are trying to unravel do not exist at all. There is a small party who are actually of this opinion and [482] who try to show that, if any law exists, it can only be this: The Law is whatever the nobles do. This party see everywhere only the arbitrary acts of the nobility, and reject the popular tradition, which according to them possesses only certain trifling and incidental advantages that do not offset its heavy drawbacks, for it gives the people a false, deceptive, and overconfident security in confronting coming events. This cannot be gainsaid, but the overwhelming majority of our people account for it by the fact that the tradition is far from complete and must be more fully inquired into, that the material available, prodigious as it looks, is still too meager, and that several centuries will have to pass before it becomes really adequate. This view, so comfortless as far as the present is concerned, is lightened only by the belief that a time will eventually come when the tradition and our research into it will jointly reach their conclusion, and as it were gain a breathing space, when everything will have become clear, the law will belong to the people, and the nobility will vanish. This is not maintained in any spirit of hatred against the nobility; not at all, and by no one. We are more inclined to hate ourselves, because we have not yet shown ourselves worthy of being entrusted with the laws. And that is the real reason why the party who believe that there is no law have remained so few – although their doctrine is in certain ways so attractive, for it unequivocally recognizes the nobility and its right to go on existing. Actually one can express the problem only in a sort of paradox: Any party that would repudiate not only all belief in the laws, but the nobility as well, would have the whole people behind it; yet no such party can come into existence, for nobody would dare to repudiate the nobility. We live on this razor's edge. A writer once summed the matter up in this way: The sole visible and indubitable law that is imposed upon us is the nobility, and must we ourselves deprive ourselves of that one law?

Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir

(*The Complete Stories*, Schocken, 1971, p 481. Written between between 1917 and 1923.)

19. Dora Diamont

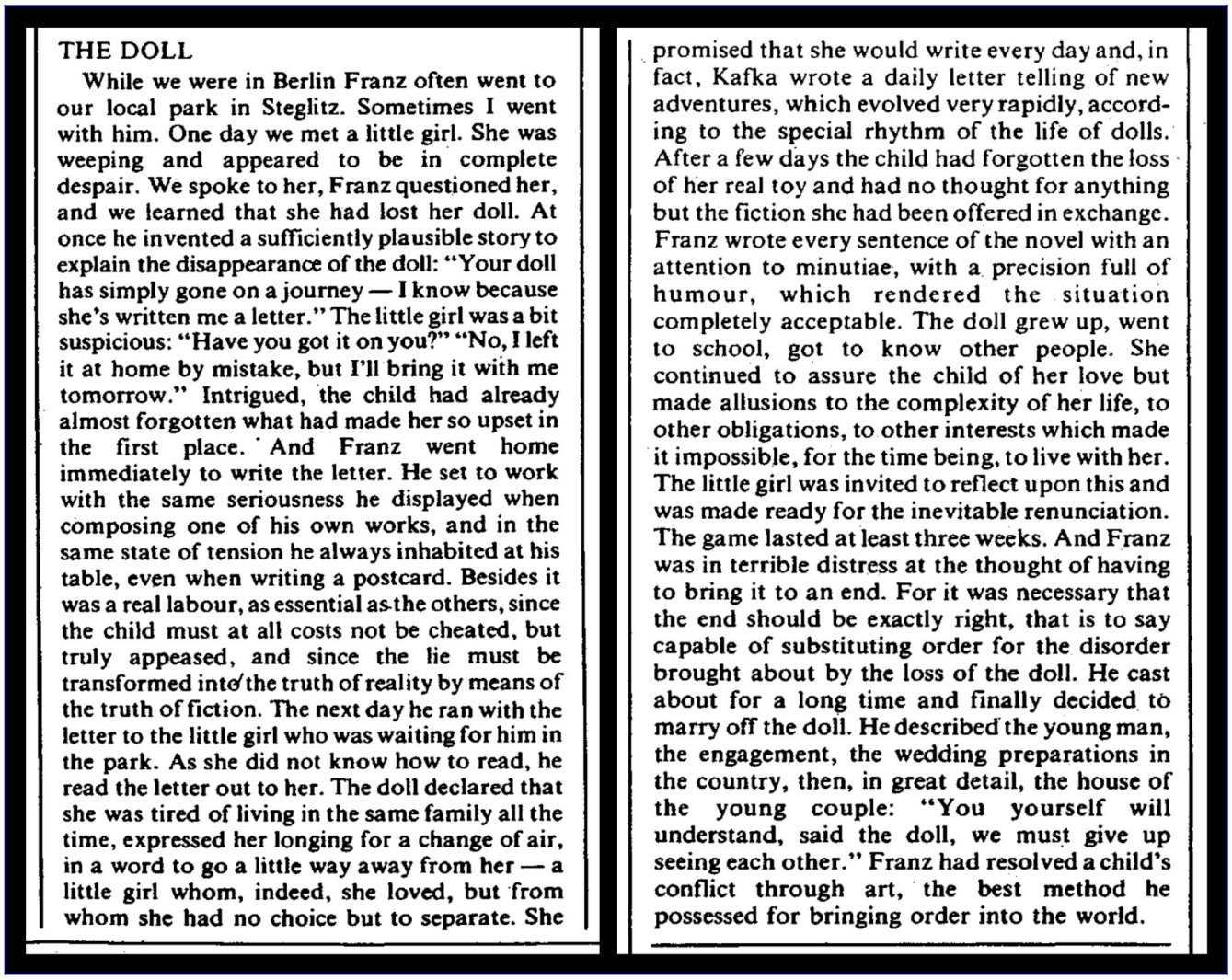
"...the lie must be transformed into the truth of reality by means of the truth of fiction."

– from *The Doll*, a fiction [it is safest to say] about a fiction with a [possibly] fictional message .

Cast: Dora Diamont, Franz Kafka, a little girl, and a doll.

Commentary: We don't know if this story is true so it's probably best to say it is fiction. There is (to date) no evidence behind its truth beyond the testimony of Dora Diamont, who met Kafka and lived with him for the last year of his life. After his death, she related the story to Max Brod, Kafka's friend and biographer. That it has repeatedly captured the popular imagination of many in the last century is

further evidence it may be a fiction. It has even been made into a children's book. True stories rarely go so viral.



THE DOLL

While we were in Berlin Franz often went to our local park in Steglitz. Sometimes I went with him. One day we met a little girl. She was weeping and appeared to be in complete despair. We spoke to her, Franz questioned her, and we learned that she had lost her doll. At once he invented a sufficiently plausible story to explain the disappearance of the doll: "Your doll has simply gone on a journey — I know because she's written me a letter." The little girl was a bit suspicious: "Have you got it on you?" "No, I left it at home by mistake, but I'll bring it with me tomorrow." Intrigued, the child had already almost forgotten what had made her so upset in the first place. And Franz went home immediately to write the letter. He set to work with the same seriousness he displayed when composing one of his own works, and in the same state of tension he always inhabited at his table, even when writing a postcard. Besides it was a real labour, as essential as the others, since the child must at all costs not be cheated, but truly appeased, and since the lie must be transformed into the truth of reality by means of the truth of fiction. The next day he ran with the letter to the little girl who was waiting for him in the park. As she did not know how to read, he read the letter out to her. The doll declared that she was tired of living in the same family all the time, expressed her longing for a change of air, in a word to go a little way away from her — a little girl whom, indeed, she loved, but from whom she had no choice but to separate. She promised that she would write every day and, in fact, Kafka wrote a daily letter telling of new adventures, which evolved very rapidly, according to the special rhythm of the life of dolls. After a few days the child had forgotten the loss of her real toy and had no thought for anything but the fiction she had been offered in exchange. Franz wrote every sentence of the novel with an attention to minutiae, with a precision full of humour, which rendered the situation completely acceptable. The doll grew up, went to school, got to know other people. She continued to assure the child of her love but made allusions to the complexity of her life, to other obligations, to other interests which made it impossible, for the time being, to live with her. The little girl was invited to reflect upon this and was made ready for the inevitable renunciation. The game lasted at least three weeks. And Franz was in terrible distress at the thought of having to bring it to an end. For it was necessary that the end should be exactly right, that is to say capable of substituting order for the disorder brought about by the loss of the doll. He cast about for a long time and finally decided to marry off the doll. He described the young man, the engagement, the wedding preparations in the country, then, in great detail, the house of the young couple: "You yourself will understand, said the doll, we must give up seeing each other." Franz had resolved a child's conflict through art, the best method he possessed for bringing order into the world.

Far from suggesting Kafka abused the child by telling her lies, most people find this a powerful indictment of the Kantian commandment that lying can *never* be morally acceptable.[7] Dora was not a disinterested party. She adored Kafka. Part of his attraction for her was his compassionate integrity. People *need* lies. But that doesn't stop the lies being lies. Which should make us wonder how valuable truth, as such, is to us. Still, it was perhaps out of character for her to make up the story from whole cloth – though she told more than one version of the story. Nor was it impossible to imagine the story as true in the view of others who knew Kafka well, such as Max Brod.

7. Kant argued that, because morality is grounded in respect for the rational autonomy of those capable of such, willful deception prevents its exercise (you cannot rationally assess your decisions based on false information). Thus lying is *categorically* wrong. Unless, of course, the target of the lie is *not* rationally competent, which arguably could be said of a small child.

In one version of the story, at their last meeting, Kafka brings the girl a replacement doll, inside which is a note saying, “Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way.” Years later, a grown woman, she discovers the note.

Was/is what the note said (the moral of the story, as it were) a lie as well? That “love will return in another way”?

Kafka died in 1924 of tuberculosis shortly after the alleged incident. His three surviving sisters lived to die in concentrations camps. Dora barely escaped to Britain just before the war. The woman, who had been the girl, *if* she was real, likely died in one of the camps, too – some speculate.

KAFKA & THE LOST DOLL • An animated short film by Olie Rehman • Artistolie

The philosophical question is: *is offering heart-felt consolation a legitimate excuse for lying?*[8]

...

To drive home the point, compare the U.S. media characterization of Joe Biden:

8. No, Kant would say, at least not if the target was rationally competent. Lying to someone, to be morally acceptable, requires a judgment that the target of the lie is rationally incompetent. (“A basket of deplorables,” Hilary Clinton famously described a set she did not think were competent, facilitating the condescension, for example, Barack Obama later displayed while addressing young black men.) So, either the public is rationally incompetent, in which case, democracy in such a context is incoherent, or a moral crime has been committed. What might be excusable in the case of a child, cannot be, without condescension, in the case of the rationally competent.

"The 'Fiery' State of the Media | Senile Joe Biden is 'Fiery' 'Forceful' & 'Strong'"

Did the mainstream media innocently intend to console their audience for its having made an unfortunate choice of president? Or were they cynically gaslighting the public? Were they making fun of Biden? Or were they willing believers[9] in some sense, like the little girl in the Kafka story?[10]

Were these victims of epistemic abuse? Or not? Does truth matter? (This last is not a rhetorical question. *Does* it, really?)

It is easier to imagine a child's innocence, but is there such a thing as *mass* innocence in a *real* democracy?

…

To the extent literature *provokes*, to that extent, it is doing what philosophy *should* be doing.

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at The Philosophy Club in November 2024
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle

9. "Fact-checking" to the rescue: "If Biden is in mental decline, it should, in theory, be easy to defeat him, and to win electoral and strategic victories. But for the most part, those victories have not been forthcoming. Instead, the GOP keeps underestimating Biden — and then, partially perhaps as a result, losing." reported a commentator at the *Independent*, in July 2023.
10. Even the girl, in Diamont's telling of the story, had her suspicions.